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ADMISSION TO FRESHMAN ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY

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To answer the question, What should boys and girls who intend to enter the University of Wisconsin do to qualify themselves to pursue college work in English? is the purpose of a bulletin, entitled *Requirements for Admission to the Freshman English Course*, recently issued by the University of Wisconsin.¹ Incidentally the bulletin gives a great deal of illuminating—perhaps it will be considered lurid—information as to the causes that have for years produced, and still continue to produce, the disbarment from the Freshman English course in that University of from 15 to 20 per cent of the entering Freshmen on the ground of unfitness to pursue an English course of college grade.

The mission of this bulletin will be better understood if a few facts are stated concerning what may be called the English situation in Wisconsin—which is as grievously vexatious in the educational affairs of the state as the Mexican situation in international politics. These are the facts:

Students who graduate from the high schools of the state are supposed to be prepared to enter the University and pursue the regular University courses. But as a matter of fact nearly 20 per cent of such students are annually found unprepared to take the Freshman English course—a course which is, in a sense, the most important Freshman study, since it is prescribed for all students in the University, whether in the College of Letters and Science, the College of Engineering, the College of Agriculture, or any other department. Nearly 20 per cent of such students, bringing to the University their certificates of successful completion of the English work in high schools accredited to the University—that is, high

¹ *Bulletin No. 13, High-School Series.* To be obtained from the Secretary of the University. Price ten cents.

schools vouched for by the University as competent and authorized preparatory schools—are annually excluded from a regular Freshman course in the University as unfit. One may well ask, with Nicodemus, “How can these things be?” The University catalogue throws a little light on the subject when it states broadly that “every student entering the University is examined as to his ability to express himself in clear, correct, idiomatic English,” and that “no student will be . . . permitted to pursue the Freshman English course whose work shows serious weakness in spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence-construction, or division into paragraphs.” The University’s contract with the accredited schools to receive their graduates as members of itself is thus clearly limited by the proviso that, if those graduates are, at the time of their entrance into the University, deficient in their use of English, they will not be received as members in full standing.

But if the high schools are aware (as they presumably are) of the University’s requirement that entering students demonstrate their ability to write “clear, correct, idiomatic English”—English not evincing “serious weakness in spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence-construction, or division into paragraphs”—how does it come that they send annually to Madison from a hundred and fifty to two hundred students whom the University finds unable to meet that requirement?

Can it be that the standard by which the University judges the English of entering students is so high that to bring students up to that standard is beyond the power of the high schools? The bulletin under discussion seems to give a convincing negative to this hypothesis. For it appears from the bulletin that the ability to write “clear, correct, idiomatic English” is, in the eyes of the University, a very rudimentary affair, which any graduate of a high school, whether he intends to enter the University or not, ought to have attained; and that by “serious weakness in spelling, punctuation, grammar,” etc., the University means simply illiteracy, of which no graduate of a high school should be guilty—illiteracy, for example, like the following:

“The first thing I expect the University to do for me is to become an electrical engineer.”

"How can his cattle give milk with-out water?"

"The great differences in the courses offered by the University are much more in advance of those offered in a smaller college."

"The cows were stretching themselves waiting to be milked which I did. After milking and seperating I feed the pigs which were making more racket then a bunch of sophmores."

"Then there is a certain amount of Athletics, that will receive part, or some of my attention, such as: work in the gymnasium, just enough, of that work to keep my musels, developed, in in a heal-ty condition."

"Shylock has probably been planing on geting his revenge."

"Under the many disadvantages put forth to the freshmen, namely: hazing which is one of the most embarrassing times in a mans life, being scoffed at, ridiculed, and some times injured and lastly to be compelled to wear a green cap, takes away the freshmen's initiave, his confidence and he is forever stumbling and sprawling all over the campus."

"Hazeing if not carried to far is alright."

"My object in coming to the U., was to attain a higher knowledge of education. I wish to prepare my-self for the difficulties and the environments of life. To fit my-self to be capable of mingling with educated people and converse with them. Also to be able to understand their line of argumentation in their talk. Further more, I wish to know, the different parts of the human body. To become acquain-ted with the names of the different organs."

"Have not the people enuf knowledge to ably chose a senator?"

"Some of the chord wood is halled to the house for the farmers own use."

"The avridge freshmen regards such an occurance with dissaproval."

"The Souphmores haze the Freshmen to try to find out how much endurance the later possesses."

"The voter finds it inconvient to go to the poles so looses his vote."

"Imagine yourself pulled from your bed, at any time of the night, and ordered to dress in a hurry, being half asleep your toilet is not apt to be the neatest, never-the-less you are brot forth in the street to act and do stunts to the amusement of the crowd around you, who shout and laugh, some ordering you to do one thing, some another, and not without threats, for it is their pleasure to have you refuse, so they might have the least excuse to give you a cool bath by throwing you into some nearby lake."

The impression conveyed by the foregoing examples of the English that is adjudged not passable—the impression that the University's standard is far from rigorous—is summed up by the bulletin in these words:

When we say that a certain amount of proficiency is necessary, we mean a certain amount of proficiency in the rudiments of writing. Students whose writing is devoid of interest, originality, or any other literary merit, are qualified if their writing is satisfactory as to the rudiments.

It seems clear, then, that the existence of so large a percentage of high-school graduates disqualified for Freshman English work in college is not due to the enforcement by the University of unduly difficult requirements. Rather, the case seems to be that the University's requirements, lenient and rudimentary as they are, are not known by the high schools; that they have never yet been fully and definitely stated so that the high schools could be certain just what should be accomplished in the high-school course in English composition. The statement in the catalogue, though it has a semblance of definiteness, is after all not definite; it leaves room for such questions as these: What is clear English? How much or how little is included under the term "correct, idiomatic English"? What practices does the University consider as indicating "serious weakness in punctuation"? To answer such questions—to furnish a complete, detailed, and abundantly illustrated formulation of the requirements for admission to the Freshman English course—is the object of the bulletin under review.

The requirements are grouped under two heads: Mental Grasp and Correctness.

The requirement under the first head is stated thus:

Mental grasp.—The student must be able to deal with a subject in an intelligent way, as regards (1) the organization of the discussion as a whole, and (2) the phraseology of single statements. He must be able to grasp a subject, to shape a discussion of it according to a plan, and to write sentences about it that make sense. He must not go to pieces, or crumple up, in constructing an essay or expressing an idea.

The requirement under the second head, Correctness, is that students shall make a "reasonable approximation to the following six conditions":

- I. Correctness of vocabulary.
- II. Grammatical correctness.
- III. Correctness in reference—that is, in the use of pronouns and other reference words.
- IV. Elementary rhetorical correctness in sentence-structure.
- V. Elementary rhetorical correctness in the structure of whole compositions.
- VI. Mechanical correctness—that is, correctness in manuscript arrangement, spelling, the writing of compound words, capitalization, punctuation, and other mechanical matters.

But this analysis of the requirement is only an introductory summary; the bulletin goes on to state specifically all that is included under each of the six titles in the analysis. It does this by the following method: Assuming that, just as it is possible to define legality by enumerating all the laws compliance with which constitutes legality, so it is possible to define correctness by enumerating all the principles conformity to which constitutes correctness, it proceeds to formulate concisely those principles in the observance of which correctness of vocabulary consists, those in the observance of which grammatical correctness consists, etc. The whole body of principles, together with copious illustrations, occupies twenty-seven pages of the bulletin. The number of rules is just eighty-seven.

The compression of all the University's requirements concerning correct English into this brief compass is a *tour de force* in statement; but corresponding to this short cut in the statement of requirements there will, of course, be no short cut in the work of meeting the requirements. The whole matter of syntax, for example—all that one needs to know in order to steer a blameless course among the thousand problems of *me* and *I*, *they* and *them*, *who* and *whom*, *has* and *have*, *beautiful* and *beautifully*, which are constantly presenting themselves—all this is summed up in ten short statements covering a page and a half. But this fact will in no wise reduce the amount of study and practice, instruction and discipline that are, in most cases, necessary to a real mastery of syntax. The bulletin emphatically warns its readers that its compendium is presented only as a means of succinctly informing teachers what the requirements are—that it is not intended to be used, and cannot profitably be used, as a medium of instruction, as an easy means of reaching a goal which can never be reached otherwise than by patient labor on the part of students and teachers alike.

Thus the value of the bulletin lies simply in its giving an answer to the high schools that ask, "Just what shall we do to insure our students' being qualified for University work in English?" The bulletin answers, "Teach your students the things here enumerated."

It is not required, to be sure, that students entering the Uni-

versity shall be perfect in the observance of the enumerated principles; a "reasonable approximation" will be accepted. Whether or not students make such an approximation, the bulletin says, must be decided in individual cases, and no hard-and-fast criterion can be fixed. The high schools are now informed, however, of all the factors that enter into the decision. More than this, they are informed of the comparative weight of various factors; for the bulletin classifies its eighty-seven principles into three groups: five of greatest importance, thirty-six of medium importance, and forty-six of least importance; and it makes a corresponding classification of faults in writing. "In many cases," the bulletin says, "students are judged disqualified because of the habit of committing one fault of the first group or more than one of the second group." The limits of this review do not permit a full explanation of this ranking of faults. It may be remarked, however, that more serious than any fault of vocabulary or grammar—more serious because indicative of a fundamental ignorance of the most important element of discourse, namely, the sentence—is the habit of using the period thus:

"In making cheese the milk is first taken and tested. The richer milk going in to make the best cheese and the poorer to make the common cheese."

"I expect to receive a fair knowledge of English which will help me in my work. Also to get a better understanding of the work I have selected as my vocation instrumental music."

or the comma thus:

"Before loading see that each part is firmly in place, if this is not done the result of firing the gun may be an explosion."

Besides the very numerous examples of incorrect English cited as violations of the various principles formulated, the bulletin prints twenty-two complete essays written at the preliminary test in 1912 by Freshmen who were judged not qualified for admission to the Freshman English course. One of these essays is here reproduced:

THE KIND OF BOOKS I LIKE

I am not much of a hand at reading books, by this I mean reading novels. When I do read a novel I like to get ahold of a good one, not one by Chambers because I think if a person reads one of Chambers books he knows what the

main theme of all his books are, but I think if a person reads one of Wrights or Porters stores he is always wishing to read any others by these two authors because he know that each one of the books written by the last two men will always have a different theme, anyway that is the way I think it is. I dont very often read a novel, but one in a while I will pick one up and read it, because is kind of give me a change but when I do read one I want one which deals with the happier thoughts in life and not one which makes a joke out of life as some of the authors do of the present day. I for myself would much rather read some of the older books than start to read the trash written in over half of the books of the present day, which are written to sell and not to stay in the list of great writers.

The bulletin concludes with an invitation to all accredited schools to send annually to the University specimens of the composition of high-school Seniors; these papers the department of English in the University will read and criticize, and will return, indicating on each paper whether the English is, according to the University standard, passable or not passable. Teachers of English in high schools are earnestly urged "to co-operate with the University in this way in an endeavor to accomplish an end which they and the University desire in common: namely, that the number of unfortunate students who enter the University unfit for admission to the Freshman English course may speedily be reduced to a minimum—may be reduced, if possible, to extinction."